

An agenda for all

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The major opposition party, the left-centrist Hromada, published its pre-election agenda, adopted by the party's 4th congress on October 30, 1997. Designed to please the whole spectrum of potential voters, from aging Soviet Union devotees to flourishing new businessmen, Hromada's agenda displays a remarkable mixture of leftist and centrist slogans which, enhanced by publicity and generous sponsorship, are likely to earn Hromada a substantial number of seats in the next parliament. Anticipating a clear victory, Hromada took practical steps: like no other party, it has already created its own "shadow cabinet" and a "coalition opposition government" and announced its determination to side with "other constructive political forces" and take responsibility for the future of this state.

The Message

"The All-Ukrainian Community Hromada is in direct opposition to the current power regime that proved to be unable to bring Ukraine out of the deep economic crisis. As an opposition party, we stand for protection of constitutional rights and liberties of every individual, against the usurpation of power," states Hromada's election agenda.

The Strategy

Hromada's strategy "of renaissance and development of Ukraine" includes the following:

"creation of a civil society that will really provide for control over the state apparatus and minimize the administrative arbitrariness, state corruption and state totalitarianism." "We struggle not for power but for making the power serve interests of the people and rest within the hands of persons [who are] highly professional and caring for the state." Claims the agenda;

"provision of all necessary political, economic and social conditions for meeting spiritual and material interests of an individual and every family is the utmost goal of the Hromada party. We place an individual, as the supreme social value, in the center of our policy and development strategy. Without well-being and spiritual renaissance of an individual there may be no strong democratic state and a civil society";

"guaranteed equality of all forms of property: private, state, property of joint-stock and leased enterprises; removal of administrative obstacles to development of small and medium business";

"renaissance of national production: guaranteed protection of interests of national manufacturers and consumers." When it comes to power, within 1998-1999, the Hromada party aims at "halting the avalanche-like decrease of national production and ensuring creation of new jobs, 5-fold reduction of unemployment";

"from 2000 onwards, there is a real possibility to ensure accelerated, stable development of the Ukrainian economy, and on this basis, to bring the level of development of the social sphere to European standards";

"introduction of an effective mechanism of liquidating budget debts - unpaid wages, pensions, scholarships, subsistence for the military, social security payments to the disabled - without attraction of foreign loans."

Pre-Election Social Security Pledges

These differ little from election pledges made by any other of the thirty parties and blocks formally registered for the race.

Hromada claims to guarantee:

- higher salaries to teachers, doctors, academics, culture personnel "whose salaries have been made unjustly low";
- reimbursement of citizens' lost savings and investments in pyramid schemes;
- monthly payment of salaries, scholarships, pensions, subsistence for the military
- introduction of effective public control over "big" privatization "in the interests of the nation" on the basis of transparent rules, understandable for citizens;
- a pension reform that would allow to increase pensions to 98 UAH (US\$ 49) per month by April 1998 and to 141 UAH per month by April 1999. According to Hromada's economic agenda, Ukrainian citizens will be able to build their own pension plans on the basis of the general social security fund;
- special low-interest mortgages for needy first-time buyers and young families;
- guaranteed first jobs for young people, state support for the youth, beneficial employment policy, short-term consumer loans for young Ukrainians to be made from local budgets and public funds;
- health care reform, maintenance of the "positive achievements of previous decades" (i.e., free health care) in combination with introduction of a medical insurance system.

Economic Agenda

The economic agenda sounds encouraging though rather utopian for anybody who has been following Ukraine's struggle towards market reforms. Specifically, Hromada's economic vows include:

- introduction of a long-term program of raising Ukrainian products' ability to compete internationally;
- restoration of lost markets in the CIS states and gaining new markets
- measures to encourage export-oriented production;
- reduction of taxation pressure, adjustment of customs and tariff regulations;
- development of Ukraine's potential as a transit route for other countries' goods;
- building up economic potential, enhancing economic integration, ensuring export-import balance, provisions for Ukraine's economic and technological security;
- a new taxation reform designed to lift barriers that hinder development of production, entrepreneurship, business initiative and increase in salaries and wages. According to Hromada's election statement, the new taxation code to be introduced if the party comes to power will allow to cut down taxes by 50% and substantially decrease the payroll tax;
- state subsidies to agriculture, allocation of substantial funds (about US\$ 685 million in 1998 and almost US\$ 1 billion in 1999) for socially oriented construction in rural areas; state protection of national agrarian manufacturers.

To meet the demands of the intelligentsia, the agenda includes:

- development of Ukraine's national culture;
- taxation benefits for educational, culture, health care institutions, corporate and individual sponsors;
- enhancing intellectual property rights;

- equal access and availability of free preschool, primary, secondary, vocational and higher education in state-owned and communal institutions;
- formation of a single Ukrainian political nation;
- guarantees for ethnic minorities, development of their cultural and language autonomy;
- harmonization of interconfessional relations, state guarantees to all confessions.
- "integration into global and European structures, development of strategic partnership with the USA and friendly relations with the CIS states, primarily, with Russia."
- reorganization of law-enforcement agencies and "special services", control over their activities, formation of an independent judiciary.

Similarly to most of pretenders for parliamentary seats, leaders of Hromada promise to "introduce an effective system of anticorruption control in the state apparatus. State leaders and civil servants must be fully responsible for robbing the people and profiteering from commercial activity while holding their positions." An obviously false note, taking into account reports about the previous cabinet's involvement in corrupt practices.

Pluses and Minuses

Among the former, one may mention the following:

- a solid financial backing, provided by a number of big businesses, primarily the United Energy Systems of Ukraine, the infamous gas trading company led by "shadow prime minister" and Number 6 in Hromada's election list, Yulia Tymoshenko;
- control over regional and subregional authorities and the media, particularly in Dnipropetrovsk, Donetsk and Luhansk regions and in Kyiv - the areas that produce most of the votes. In his days as prime minister, Pavlo Lazarenko was reported to control five national and up to 56 regional and local newspapers. Although his possibilities to manipulate the media have shrunk since his dismissal in July 1997, he and his party still enjoy substantial coverage;
- the image of a victim, oppressed by the President and his circle.

The latter, as well as the pluses, refer more to the personality of the Hromada leader, Pavlo Lazarenko, than to the party itself. The most obvious ones are the following:

- the record of a former prime minister who never refuted allegations of his involvement in corruption
- the overtly negative attitude of the President and his circle;
- the experience of once having the power but never using it to promote any of this current campaign pledges.

Finally, there is a "minus" common to practically every of competing political forces: the lack of clear and distinct message. Like almost all of its rivals, Hromada makes an unsupported claim to have united "best intellectual and professional forces of Ukraine, representatives of small, medium and large business, intelligentsia, workers and peasants" and to be "the only party capable of bringing Ukraine successfully to the way of renaissance and development". The claim alone may prove insufficient to convince the voters.